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Problems of the migrants include their lack of desire to learn new skills and to adjust to new situations, their need to migrate to find employment during certain off-seasons, their lack of training for many kinds of jobs, their prejudiced attitude toward jobs mainly performed by foreign or colored workers, their tendency to leave a job when undesirable conditions occur, their lack of private and adequate toilet facilities in the fields, their habit of working sporadically, and their preference not to settle.

The four broad categories of migrants include the nonconforming rover who avoids being tied down to a job and enjoys freedom to move about whenever he pleases, the skid-row individual who is usually a single man without a family, the seasonal worker who moves from place to place, and the future-oriented person who is seeking responsibility and a permanent job.

Solutions to the problems of these migrants should include an educational program stressing versatility, retraining, stabilization, and public relations. Labor contractors should give job preference to local people; teachers should try to raise the goals of the children of migrant parents.

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Agricultural Laborers

CHARACTERISTICS OF FARM WORKERS AS RELATED TO STABILIZATION OF THE WORK FORCE x/

Talk at Third Annual Conference on ~~Farmers~~ Families Who Follow the Crops, Visalia, California

March 2, 1962

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I migrated to California in 1907 and have been here either in body or in mind ever since. I was raised on a farm in this State in the days when farm families did their own work and then went out and helped their neighbors.

I have always felt responsible for some of the unfortunate migrant workers in California. Back in 1936 while doing research for the University of Arkansas, I was calling on the drought stricken families in the Ozarks. They had lost all their crops, and no jobs were available. They would say to me, "Many of our neighbors are leaving for California. Do you think that we should go?" I usually said, "It will cost you $50 or $60 to make the trip. If you can get that much together, you'd better go, because many workers are needed there in the fruit and the cotton." Some were so tired of starvation that they left that very day in spite of the fact that they had only fifty cents instead of fifty dollars.

I called on some Ozark families when they were having their noon meal. They passed a piece of cornbread to each member of the family which measured between two and three inches square. Cornbread made with water had been their only food for three meals a day for many months. Back in the spring they had been able to find a little sour dock for flavoring. For such people a move to California was long overdue.

I've been somewhat discouraged at the adjustment that some of these people have been able to make here. Most, of course, have moved out of seasonal farm work into nonfarm employment, but some have continued to move from one harvest to another. In spite of higher wage rates some still look as lean and bedraggled as when they left Arkansas, Oklahoma, or Texas. New waves of these impoverished, unskilled, and independent people still move in among us.

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x/ The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Farm Economics Division, ERS, or the U. S. Department of Agriculture.

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To the sociologist, migration is the first step in making a new adjustment to life. Our ancestors in Europe ran into economic or other adversities and made a long voyage to America. They were migrants, and so were their children. So today we are in California rather than in the East or in Europe. The second step in making an adjustment is to obtain a secure foothold in the economy in the new area. The ability to do this depends in part on having skills that meet the needs in the new land. A desire to make an adjustment is also essential. Many of our present migrants in California lack one, or both of these essentials. Probably we need a more positive program to help them to settle among us.

I had the opportunity to engage in a survey of farmworkers in Kern County last year. There, mechanization of the cotton harvest has proceeded very rapidly. In 1949, 30,000 workers were engaged in picking cotton, and most of them were migrants. In 1961 only 5,000 were used, and there was no migration into the area to engage in the cotton harvest (see chart). In fact, during the cotton harvest season, some Kern County residents worked in the prunes, grapes, and walnuts in other counties.

Cotton mechanization in Kern County is not yet entirely complete. Workers still "pick out" the ends of the cotton rows, and pick up the low bolls which the machines have missed. The problem now is that more seasonal employment is needed during the fall and winter in order to permit as many workers to have as close to year round employment as is possible.

We can expect that in a few years the June peak in labor use in that county will also be leveled off. At one time, a total of 14,000 workers were used to harvest potatoes, chop cotton, girdle grapes, and pick plums during the early part of June. Mechanical potato harvesters are now doing part of the harvest work in potatoes. In a few years they can do it all. A few growers are using a mechanical cotton chopper successfully. As precision planting of cotton is developed, mechanical chopping of cotton will become generally feasible. There are also possibilities for reduction in the number of workers needed for grape girdling.

The result is that within a few years Kern County agriculture could be carried on with no use of outside labor at any time of the year. Around 5,000 to 6,000 workers could do all the seasonal jobs. There are, however, two limitations to the development of a local labor force which can handle all farm work. The first is that fall, winter, and early spring labor demands may be so slack that some workers may have to migrate elsewhere for part of the year in order to have adequate employment. Fall and winter jobs should be built up, if possible.

Equally important is the fact that many workers specialize in working in a few crops, and move with them rather than changing from crop to crop in the same locality. Actually as many as three different labor forces are now used in Kern County during the course of the work season. One group came originally from cotton country and has tried to specialize in cotton chopping and picking. A second group picks potatoes in Kern County in June, then moves to the Chino-Ontario

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area to pick potatoes there. Later they may also pick potatoes in northern California and Oregon. The third group, the seasonal grape workers, start moving into the county in July and fill up the grape camps. Yet much of the labor force in grapes is now employed on close to a year round basis. Still other groups of workers harvest the plums, the melons, the hay, the citrus and other crops. Counting these smaller groups, more than three different labor forces are used in the county.

It is most difficult to train farm workers to put aside their prejudices in regard to unfamiliar types of work and to shift from crop to crop within their home area. There is no sense in a farmworker in Kern County moving his family to Riverside County to pick potatoes when he could work right at home picking peaches or grapes. The cotton or potato picker who was asked why he didn't work in the grapes usually said, "We always have picked cotton. We never did work in the grapes." Or, "Mexicans and Filipinos do that. We don't." Grape workers gave similar responses as to why they didn't work in the cotton or potatoes. A few workers are now beginning to break over these traditional lines, but many more will have to shift over, or they will have to move out of the county because the work season will be too short for several sets of workers.

An educational campaign pointing out the shortcomings of too much specialization and indicating the need for versatility might do much to shape new work habits for these people. This would be part of a retraining program conducted by labor contractors under the guidance of the Farm Placement Service. A tie-in with the County Welfare Department might also be useful. If growers are conscious of their public relations, they could do no better than to sponsor the entire training and stabilization program.

Labor contractors would be key people in any program of stabilizing the work force. Some have very stable crews and try to keep their crew members busy all year. We need more of these contractors and fewer of the more common type who say, "I make no choice between workers. I haul out any man who climbs on the truck." The latter type may have his truck filled with migrants before the local workers have a chance to get on, or when the locals see the workers in his truck they may choose to stay at home. Such contractors build up migrancy, rather than stabilization.

Labor contractors either build up a labor force of migrant families, of undesirables, or of stable local residents--depending on how and where they do their recruiting. But back of the labor contractor stands the grower. Growers who are careful to inquire about the hiring policies of the labor contractors with whom they deal and who give preference to those with stable crews assist the process of settling and stabilizing a work force in their community. Those who use contractors who specialize in "skid-row" crews help to increase the skid-row population. Growers who use migrant contractors, or contractors who specialize in migrants, help build up migrancy over the state. As they give outsiders jobs some of the local workers may have to leave home in order to obtain adequate employment.

Insufficient attention has been given to the clannishness of farmworkers, and to the reasons for it. When high school students and housewives are in the field and a group of undesirables comes in, the students and housewives leave. There are several reasons for this. The average housewife who gets on to a labor contractor's truck may find that some of the male workers on the truck begin to make offensive remarks. She may decide that farm work is not for her.

There is also the problem of privacy and acceptability of toilet facilities in the fields. The presence of workers from the lowest social strata has driven the more self-respecting workers out of the fields in many parts of California. This has down-graded the status of seasonal farm labor in some areas. In some parts of the State the grower of a crop such as cotton apologizes to me if I find him out in the field trying to save some of his crop. In those areas, it apparently is no longer respectable for a grower to do hand work.

The labor contractors and farmers who "day haul" out of the skid-row areas have unwittingly down-graded the status of some types of farm labor in the State. The same process is beginning to make some headway in our neighboring States--Oregon, Washington, and Idaho. Work in sugar beets, cotton, and vegetable crops has been down-graded the most. Within certain localities, work for particular types of farmers has come to be associated with inferior social status, because of the type of workers that they employ. Growers who have hired the best grade of labor have been unable to counteract this trend.

In discussing popular attitudes toward different kinds of farm wage work, it is necessary to consider the matter of race or ethnic background. Anglo workers tend to look down on jobs that are performed largely by foreign or colored workers. This may simply be a matter of race prejudice, but there may also be some background of unfortunate experience connected with it. In building up a stable local labor force these types of prejudice and ideas of status must be considered. To get farm workers to work together calls for an intimate knowledge of their stereotyped ideas.

The survey of hired farm workers in Kern County in 1961 indicated some of the major characteristics of the present farmwork force in that county. Of the 696 workers in the sample, 61 percent were seasonal hand workers who picked and chopped the cotton, picked up the potatoes, picked the grapes, plums, or peaches; 25 percent were general farm workers who worked on equipment, at irrigating, at supervision, and at other general farm jobs; 14 percent engaged in shed work, hauling, and other activities related to agriculture. So the former situation of many hand workers and only a few general farm hands no longer pertains. The number of seasonal workers is declining and there is a trend toward more regular farm employment.

Migration is also on the decline. Of the 696 workers in the sample, 54 percent lived in Kern County and did not leave during the year. In 1961, then, migratory workers in this county were already in the minority. Five-sixths of all migrants who had to leave their home area to find work came from outside the State--from Texas, Mexico,

Arizona, Oklahoma. Approximately one-third of the sample migrant workers, however, had their homes in Kern County. These were migrants because they had to go elsewhere at some time of the year in order to obtain adequate employment. Over half of all sample hired farm labor families had come to Kern County since 1950. They were part of a wave of immigrants who came in after World War II or in connection with the Korean War.

The effect of too much specialization by farm workers shows up in employment figures: Almost 15 percent of the 696 workers in the sample in Kern County worked in cotton only--cotton chopping and cotton picking. They had an average of only 79 days of employment and $703 for their year's work. There was practically no employment for them during January, February, March, and April. Almost 10 percent of the workers worked only in potatoes. They averages 82 days of employment during the year and $964 for their work. By way of contrast, over 10 percent of the workers worked in 5, 6, or 7 crops. They averaged 186 days of employment and $2,152. Heads of households who worked only in cotton had 130 days of work during the year; those who worked only in potatoes had 146 days; and those who worked in 5, 6, or 7 crops had 229 days.

The problem of how to help these workers obtain more employment is not an easy one. Our observations in Kern County point to the existence of one group of workers who are habitual migrants. They prefer not to settle down. They seem to abhor going back to the same job day after day. They avoid both punching the time clock, and a day in and day out existence with the same neighbors. They seem to prefer to have big gaps in their employment, so that they will have time to sit in the sun and enjoy themselves.

Growers who have to rely on workers of this type are in a difficult position, particularly if they have perishable crops. They have resorted to importation of foreign labor, rather than to be at the mercy of workers who have no feeling of responsibility toward them.

Some people try to account for the irregularity of such workers as stemming from their migratory life. I recall, however, that back in the thirties when the first of these people had left their small burned out farms in the middle west--at a time when there was a great surplus of them in the State--growers even then complained that they could not obtain enough workers to handle their crops. Farmer after farmer has told me of this type of experience with them: a broken down car limps into the farmer's driveway. A fine capable looking young man climbs out and indicates that he needs work very badly, his car has to be repaired and the family is without food. The more the farmer sees of the family the better he likes it. He employs the man, provides the family with a house, and brings in a box of groceries. He visions the young worker as the type of regular year round farm hand that he has been hoping for. The young man works hard and learns rapidly, but at the end of the third day, he asks for his pay because he has heard of work up in the adjoining county. Actually he has avoided being tied down to a job and is still free to move about as he pleases.

My research among the farm families in Oklahoma and Arkansas during the thirties indicated that people of two far different cultural backgrounds occupied the area. For every capable farmer, there were several other hill folk who regarded farming as too slow and laborious. They couldn't find time to plant their crops, if the hunting or fishing was food or if they could make a few dollars by cutting wood. They liked to work sporadically, but avoided activities that interfered with following their momentary inclinations. It is important that we understand these workers because mechanization of the cotton harvest is making it impossible for them to make a living by moving from crop to crop over the state. They will have to learn to live differently. If they were Indians we would expect them to have a system of living and thinking that is different from our own, but these are white people who have attitudes and habits that resemble those of the Indians more closely than they do those of the stable and conforming citizen.

The anthropologist would point out that these people are raised in an entirely different culture complex from ours, different values, different goals, and different habits of using their time. Ingrained ways of life can't be overcome by logic or strength of argument. Emotion does a better job. Intermarriage dilutes these values, and at least some of the children will acquire the "do your best, and get ahead" philosophy that dominates the rest of us.. An entirely new life situation sometimes leads to a change. Many youth came back from two or three years in the service, with new aspirations and values.

What to do with this nonconforming element in the farm work force will be a problem for a considerable period of time. Migrant children are usually raised in this pattern of life and few have the right contacts to enable them to choose to live otherwise. The school system can assist in the adjustment process if teachers make a special effort to catch the affection and raise the aspirations of children from these families.

The problem as to what to do with a second group of farmworkers, those of the "skid-row" type, seems at first glance to be more difficult than the problem of stabilizing our roving families. It is, however, much easier. Individuals of the "skid-row" type are largely single men and they have no families to perpetuate their way of life. Many are old enough to soon qualify for some type of old age assistance. The younger ones are highly mobile and can be forced by non-employment into new surroundings that will permit them to turn their abilities to greater advantage.

Don't get the idea, however, that all farm workers, or even all migratory farmworkers are irresponsible. A third group of farm workers has the same heritage of ideas of getting ahead that we do. They are no problem and no special effort is needed to explain their behavior. To such families, migratory farmwork is a stepping stone toward a better position in the economy. They need something to do while they move from place to place watching for an opportunity. Such farm workers are likely to be unhappy because opportunities to get out of farm work are rare except in time of national crisis.

A forth group of farm workers was also important in the Kern County farm labor force. In slack times many industrial workers still drop back into seasonal farmwork. Over one-third of the farm workers in Kern County had been in nonfarm employment at one time but had dropped back into seasonal farm work. Five percent of the farm-workers had dropped back during the 12 months prior to our survey. Seasonal farmwork is the only type of work in which a person can find immediate employment. No one can say of it, "This is my job, and you'll have to look somewhere else." A larger number of workers simply means a shorter season, and less work per worker. When unemployed industrial workers drop back to farmwork, it obviously works a hard-ship on workers who depend entirely on seasonal agricultural employ-ment.

Considering all seasonal farmworkers together, however, the major farmwork problem in Kern County is not so much one of wage rates as it is one of underemployment. Seasonal farm workers in Kern County in 1960 averaged only 101 days of work as compared to 235 days for those in general farmwork. The underemployment problem has at least three aspects. First, the work season is short and unless special steps are taken mechanization may make it even shorter. Research by public agencies is needed in regard to crops and varieties that will spread out the work season. Second, the present organiza-tion of hiring procedures stimulates crop specialization and migrancy. Three or four different labor forces for unskilled seasonal labor hardly squares up with the efficiency that we find in other phases of production. Apparently no one assumes the responsibility of looking after the efficiency of the farming economy in a locality. And third, there are some workers who enjoy leisure along with their employment. Getting welfare payments, free groceries, and other assistance is as much an aspect of their life as sporadic work.

Finally, I should like to discuss briefly several developments that may lead to a new labor situation in this State. Probably I should say something in regard to farm operators who may refuse to change their hiring policies in the direction of a more stable labor force. Growers can be set in their ways too. Many of them have a great interest in the methods of growing grapes, cotton, or peaches, but have given little attention in regard to producing good workers. I am pleased to observe that the State Farm Bureau is stressing more study on grower-worker relationships. Other grower organizations are looking for ways to meet the labor problem. Yet I expect that any farm labor program will lack unanimous support.

But we can move in the direction of smoothing out seasonal work requirements and improving our hiring procedures. If there is no standing invitation to migrant people to hop around over the country as they please, they may find it necessary to settle down here, or even go back go their small farms. A reorganization of hiring proce-dures designed to stabilize the labor force could be developed in a comparatively short time by an association of farmers which operated through responsible crew leaders.

New elements are moving into the migratory labor picture in Kern County. The survey showed that over 10 percent of the families in the work force of the county had moved into the continental United States during the past three years. Most of these were Mexicans who were making a permanent move into California. A few were Puerto Rican and Filipino families, also planning to make California their home. It is impossible to say that these families are the forerunners of a large movement into the State. That probably depends on how members of the present group get along, and what they write to their relatives and friends back home. They seem to be very stable workers and prefer to stay in one place. They, and the grape workers generally, are the type of people who can form the nucleus of a stable seasonal work force in Kern County.

Mechanization of the cotton harvest in California is bringing on a drastic reduction in the number of migratory workers. Mechanization of other harvests in the State can do still more toward cutting down the labor peaks and reducing the need for migrancy. This should come soon in the tomato area and later in some of the vegetable areas. But stabilization may not be realized unless we, at the same time, train workers out of their habits of job specialization, and also train crew leaders to give local crew members a preference in the job market. The seasonal labor problem in many counties is now getting down to a manageable size and growers and crewleaders can substantially reduce that embarrassing problem, migratory labor.

Agricultural Laborers
Metzler, William H.
Characteristics of the Work Force.